Ear Infection

**The middle ear is a small air-filled space behind the ear drum.** Germs can get into this space and cause an infection. Middle ear infections are also called otitis media. They are very common in children between the ages of 6 months and 2 years.

**Ear infections cannot be spread from person to person.** They are not caused by forgetting to wear a hat or sleeping under a fan. Antibiotics help kill the germs that cause the infection.

**Most ear infections start to get better over 2 to 3 days and do not produce serious problems.** In some children, the infection may cause a hole in the eardrum. This hole will usually heal itself once the infection is treated. The drainage will stop in a few days.

**Your child is more at risk for an ear infection if he or she**

- Attends daycare  
- Sucks or chews on a pacifier  
- Is exposed to a smoky environment  
- Lays flat and drinks a bottle before bed or naptime

**Call 911 or an ambulance if your child:**

- Is not moving or is very weak.

**Call your child’s regular doctor NOW (night or day) if your child:**

- Is less than 3 months old and has a temperature over 100.3°F (38°C)  
- Has a temperature over 104°F (40°C) at any age  
- Looks or acts very sick  
- Earache is severe and not improved 2 hours after taking medicine for pain  
- Has redness or swelling behind the ear  
- Has a really bad headache or a stiff neck  
- Can’t touch his or her chin to chest

**Call your child’s regular doctor if your child:**

- Has a temperature greater than 100°F (37.8°C) for more than 72 hours  
- Still has ear pain after taking medicine for 48 hours  
- Has new drainage from the ear

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This handout is for your general information only. The lists above are guidelines and do not include all symptoms. This document is not a substitute for your child being seen by a doctor. Always call your child’s doctor if you have any questions or problems. If your child’s condition gets worse, call your child’s doctor or go to the emergency department.

St. Louis Children’s Hospital  
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Ear Infection

Signs and Symptoms of an ear infection
- Ear pain
- Fussiness or sleeping poorly at night, especially in young children
- Fever
- Drainage of creamy pus from the ear
- Pulling at the ears, but children can also do this for other minor reasons

Things you can do to help your child feel better
- Give the antibiotic medicine every day and for the full time prescribed. Do not stop it even if your child feels better.

- Use acetaminophen (Tylenol®) for pain and fever. If your child is over 6 months old then you may use ibuprofen (Motrin® or Advil®) instead. Never give your child aspirin.

- If there is ear drainage, try to keep the ear clean by gently wiping the outside of the ear with a damp lukewarm cloth. Do not put anything in your child's ear unless it is ordered by your child's doctor.

- Apply a cold pack or a cold wet washcloth to the outer ear for 20 minutes to help relieve pain. Some children prefer a heat pad or warm wet washcloth for 20 minutes. Be careful that the heat pad or washcloth is not too hot to burn your child.

- It is very important to have your child seen by their doctor’s office after the medicine is finished.

- Sometimes fluid will still be in the middle ear even though your child will not be acting sick. If the fluid does not go away over time, your doctor’s office may refer you to an Ear, Nose, and Throat doctor. Untreated fluid in the middle ear over time might cause permanent hearing damage.

For General Health Information:
Call or visit the Family Resource Center (a free health information library) located on the 3rd floor of St. Louis Children’s Hospital. Call 314.454.2350. Email at frc@bjc.org